

Harrie Mazeland: Short note on Gumperz's  
contextualization cues \*

# I. The theoretical framework

In empirical discourse analysis (or, if you like, interactional sociolinguistics) the concept of contextualization cues (c.c.'s) has become very popular (cf., e.g., Erickson & Shultz 1982, Wald 1985, Streeck 1983 or Ensink (1985)).

This popularity could be explained by reference to one of the most central problems in interpretive sociolinguistics, the difference between purely linguistic -lexical and grammatical- meaning and "situative interpretation", as Gumperz calls context-bound, interactionally accomplished, communicative meanings. (cf. Gumperz 1984:109)

The concept of c.c. seems to offer a powerful collective category, through which interpretive strategies can be related to aspects of language use. As such it accounts for participants' choice of specific interpretive strategies, whereas simultaneously it allows to relate those interpretive processes to isolable features of language use.[1]

I'll first outline the basic ideas behind the concept of c.c.'s, and then try to formulate some of the problems I have with it. These problems can be summarized beforehand in the following questions:

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\* Introductory paper to the discussion on contextualization cues; J.J. Gumperz, Nijmegen Lecture Series May 1985.

- \* is "frame" the same as "context"? (if not, do cc.'s index on context or on frame?)
- \* what is "contextualization" ?
- \* and, what is "contextualized" by contextualization cues ?

Erickson & Shultz circumscribe contextualization cues as follows:

"The term [contextualization cue] refers to those aspects of communicational 'surface structure' -verbal and nonverbal behavior- which function as cues pointing implicitly to the 'context' or 'frame' of interpretation of the meaning of behavior." (1982:71). [2]

The concept is not an isolated descriptive category. It is part of a larger theoretical framework, which can be comprised into four components:

- (1) the already outlined distinction between *linguistic meaning* and *situative interpretation*.

The meaning of an utterance is not only a function of its linguistic features, but also of its use in a specific context. Language use is seen as more than sheer performance of linguistic rules; code - specific conventions of language use, as well as other types of shared background knowledge are essential factors in the constitution of interactional meaning.

- (2) the decision about how a given utterance has to be interpreted is based on participants' definition of the situation, in other words, on the *frame* (cf. Goffman 1974) or *schema* in terms of which the interaction is defined. [3]

- (3) a notion of *interpretive inference*. Specific features of language use cue, or trigger related interpretive strategies, which enable recipients to reconstruct the meaning of specific conventions in language use. Grice's conversational implicature acts as the main model for the kind of reasoning participants use for interpretation (cf. Grice 1975).

(4) the notion co-occurrence (Ervin-Tripp 1972) has to account for the expectancy of homogeneity in language use: a code is seen as a more or less consistent set, including subsets of rules and maxims for different levels of language use, which are expected to be used together. In other words, when elements from different sets are used, they could possibly serve as indices of another interpretive frame, - as Gumperz argues for, e.g., conversational code switching.

As far as I can see, Gumperz analyzes basically two different types of contextualization cues:

(i) those forms of c.c., that are identifiable by recipients as transferred from another code than the code used before, as is the case with "conversational code switching": usually, both codes are treated by participants as shared and - in consequence - along a mechanism of "contrastive relevance" pointing to specific reasons for the switching. Via a conversational implicature (of manner; s.o.) [4], such switchings are reconstructed to trigger specific interpretive strategies. In Gumperz's analysis, they cue the "metaphorical meaning" of the code switched expression.

(ii) transfer of rules or maxims, which are not at first sight identifiable as coming from a different code than the one participants agreed upon. This type can cause different forms of 'functional interference', which are difficult to identify and can lead to serious misunderstandings.

It concerns features of language use beneath a conscious - monitorable (cf. Hagen 1981) - level, which often have a very subtle and / or abstract character. Usually features of only one subset of the other code are transferred to the code actually used (e.g., prosody or sequencing).

Eventual formal equivalence of the features from both codes is not accompanied by functional equivalence. The co-occurrence constraints absorb the cue as a -meaningful or empty- element of the set of interpretation devices of the code agreed upon

before. The transfer of such a feature possibly leads to other interpretive procedures than actually intended by speaker (for instance, a specific prosody pattern is interpreted in the first code as politely prompting, in the second as extremely impolite and rude).

## II. Two examples of contextualization cues in Gumperz's analysis

I'll now present an example of both types of contextualization-cues and then describe some of the difficulties I have with them. I'll try to show that they point to a shift in analytic perspective.

The first example involves conversational code-switching. It belongs to that type of contextualization cues, which are clearly identifiable as pointing to another interpretive system. They are reconstructed as triggering interpretive strategies that produce the "metaphorical meaning" of the code switched expression.

Gumperz discerns different types of conversational code-switching. One type is labeled as *reiterations*: an utterance in code 1 is repeated in code 2.

In his article "On the meaning of conversational code-switching" (1984) Peter Auer shows for this type of conversational code-switching, that it occurs with a certain regularity in a structurally specifiable environment of conversational organization.

It concerns code-switched reiterations of first parts of adjacency pairs after the observable absence of an expected second pair part. For example:

- (1) (( Interaction during a play group; the children are about to glue collages: ))

- Fr.: was isch des, [ what is this ]  
 (1.25) [ 1.25 ]  
 Fr.: k=kosa E kwello; [ w=what is this ]  
 Sr.: la guonna/ - (p) fac'o i gossinne (....)"  
 [the skirt-I do the skirts (...)]

(Auer 1984:96)

Such code-switched *non-first firsts* suggest participant analysis of the interactional problem displayed in the absence of a proper next. The modified repeat of the first first pair part could be regarded as a result of participant's analysis of this problem: it could be "possible that code-switching on non-first firsts locates 'wrong language' as the problem of the first attempt." (Auer 1984: 101) [5,6]

Auer's analysis has at least the following consequences for a theory on contextualization:

In Gumperz's analysis the code switching itself is treated as the cue that triggers inference for metaphorical meaning. The linguistic context of the cue merely serves as a contrastive background, simply producing the fact of code-switching.

The cue itself does not refer further to context, but to a frame with specific interpretive strategies that allow the inference of metaphorical meanings.

However, Auer's results show that further features of conversational context can be taken into account before the frame-concept has to be used as an explanatory device.

The code-switched non-first first has an observable and sequentially specifiable context, consisting of the first realization of the first pair part together with the absence of its proper next. It is exactly this context of an 'officially absent proper next' which allows strong inference. The absence of a second pair part is accountable and -because of that- legitimates inference: it invites the first participant to infer contextually and situationally the 'why' of the lacking

response (cf. Schegloff 1968: 1085-87).

Treating the code switching of the non-first first as the relevant contextualization cue produces the methodological paradox, that the contextualization of the analyst favors the construction of frame rather than looking to actual context.

The second example is an analysis of the type of contextualization cues on the level of functional interference. This type very often is not recognized as cueing another interpretative frame, because it is not accompanied by other co-occurring features of the code from which it is transferred.

A relatively large number of the examples through which Gumperz illustrates the concept of contextualization cues, concern a problem often labeled as 'indirectness' of speech acts.

One of his examples is the following:

- (2) (( A husband sitting in his living room is addressing his wife. The husband is of middle class American background, the wife is British. They have been married and living in the United States for a number of years:))

- (1) Husband: Do you know where today's paper is?  
 (2) Wife : I'll get it for you.  
 (3) Husb. : That's O.K. Just tell me where it is.  
 I'll get it.  
 (4) Wife : No I'll get it.

(Gumperz 1982b:134)

In Gumperz's analysis -validated by informant-tests- the American interpretation of utterance (1) is 'asking for informa-

tion', whereas British informants would interpret it rather as a 'request'.

Interpretive differences are seen to reflect significant variations in socio-cultural background: group-specific conventions of language use cue different inferential strategies.

The husbands' question (in example (2)) is treated by participants themselves as sequentially ambiguous: the wife treats it as a pre-request-first, which has as its preferred next the acceptance of the request reflexively projected in the pre-request interpretation (cf. Levinson 1983: 356-364). The husband rejects that interpretation in (3) and retrospectively reduces the meaning potential of his first utterance to merely the first part of a 'question-answer' pair.

Probably, it is sequential ambiguity which is negotiated here and not interference of conflicting sets of contextualization cues. [7,8]

Gumperz seems to use here an *inferential* model on speech act theory: features of an utterance are related to a specific inferential system.

In a sequential speech act model - however - the interactional meaning potential of an utterance is investigated as a function of its structurally specified sequential position. Sequential development is seen as reflexively negotiating interpretations, as is displayed by the sequential negotiation of the participants in the example.

Gumperz's "situative interpretation" involves at least partially a sequential interpretation. (Cfr. Schegloff 1984; Levinson 1983; Mazeland 1984; and from a partially different perspective, Ehlich & Rehbein 1979 and Redder 1984, 69-74).

Again investigation of context as conversationally structured is abandoned in favor of interpretation in terms of superimposed frames, which are treated as independent from actual context. [9]

### III. concluding remarks

I hope the foregoing comments to the examples illustrate a little bit the problems I have with the theoretical and methodological status of the concept of contextualization cues.

*Theoretically*, I doubt that it is appropriate to identify context with frame, - by the way, Gumperz uses these terms interchangeably.

In Gumperz's theoretical framework contextualization cues indicate the frame that has to be used for interpretation. If context is not the same as frame, the term "framing cues" would be more appropriate to express their specific theoretical status.

However, this substitution of names would preserve a theoretical framework, in which sequential aspects of meaning are located in the overarching level of 'frame'. It is necessary to analyse to which extent sequential environment differs from something such as frame, what contexts and frames are and how they relate to one another.

*Methodologically*, I think investigation of regular conversational features is necessary before interpretation is described in terms of superimposed frames.

Levinson (1983: 281) notes an inherent danger of the frame concept, namely that "appeal will be made to implicit aspects of context before the full significance of explicit aspects of context (...) have been taken properly into account." Exactly this is the case with the way in which at least a part of the data are treated in Gumperz's theory of contextualization. The equation of context and frame seduces one to neglect actual context in favor of the construction of a context-independent interpretive framework.

Finally, it has to be stressed that probably the most powerful contextualization principle is the -nearly trivial- fact, that a next utterance makes foregoing utterances to its context. Theorizing about contextualization fails its targets, when this elementary essential is taken for granted. [10]

notes

[1] The concept not only delivers the idea of an empirical base to theorizing on interpretive processes, it also forces theory to specify its empirical foundations.

[2] Erickson & Shultz are quoted, because Gumperz himself circumscribes c.c.'s rather ample and/or vague, for example: "Roughly speaking, a contextualization cue is any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signalling of contextual presuppositions. Such cues may have a number of such linguistic realizations depending on the historically given linguistic repertoire of the participants. The code, dialect and style switching processes, some of the prosodic phenomena (...) as well as choice among lexical and syntactic options, formulaic expressions, conversational openings, closings and sequencing strategies can all have similar contextualizing functions. Although such cues carry information, meanings are conveyed as part of the interactive process. Unlike words that can be discussed out of context, the meanings of contextualization cues are implicit. They are not usually talked about out of context. Their signalling value depends on the participants' tacit awareness of their meaningfulness. (...)" (1982b:131-132).

Gumperz seems to use both a narrow and a broad interpretation of the concept; in the latter c.c.'s are treated as exclusively paraverbal phenomena, in the former [the broad interpretation] it covers also verbal and non-verbal forms of signalling (cf. Ensink 1985:3).

[3] C.c.'s indicate - and trigger - the frame that has to be used for interpretation. A frame is seen to constrain interpretations by channeling inferences.

[4] Actually, the reference to Grice's implicatures holds only for the maxims of Manner; Grice ascribes the feature of

'nondetachability' to the other conversational implicatures; the (generalized) implicature is attached to semantic content, not to linguistic form. (Cfr. Grice 1975:57-58))

Where Gumperz specifies conversational implicatures to be used in the reconstruction of interpretation, he indeed usually refers to the maxim of Manner, and sometimes - e.g., in the case of code switched reiterations (1982a) - to the maxim of Quantity.

[5] Weak evidence for this hypothesis is the fact, that if recipient takes up the non-first first, he does so in the newly chosen language. (From other interactions with the same participants, Auer infers, that this language is the preferred one for the participants concerned: so the direction of code-switching also can be predicted and explained.)

Further evidence is the fact that no code-switching occurs in non-first firsts, if the common language is already the language of preference.

[6] I don't want to deal with the consequences of Auer's analysis for the description of code-switching (for instance, with respect to the distinction between situational and conversational code switching).

[7] Cfr. Wald (1985:84): "The notion that words do not have variable and metaphorical meanings within a single 'style' (defined strictly by linguistic cues) is problematic. This seems to be a pitfall for the interpretive method unaided by other methods of analysis." <

[8] To be sure, the sequential model also uses inferential principles; its inferences are based on regularly, empirically specifiable features of context, not on the general reference to a body knowledge that has to provide alone the inferential

base.

The sequential analysis does not explain the validation of informant judgments Gumperz gets for his hypothesis. Yet it is as difficult to prove these results are not produced by different socio-cultural ideas on role-obligations of married couples or differing attitudes to British or American speakers of British or American informants than through different conventions in language use.

I do not want to go into the methodological problem of validating interpretations through the questioning of informants. Cfr. the criticisms in Auer (1984), Ensink (1985), Wald (1985) or - more general - in Labov (1972).

[9] Comparable difficulties occur with the examples (9) or (10) (in Gumperz 1982b:147). The rising intonation at the end of

(9) I don't wanna read

or at the end of utterance (10)

(10) I don't know

uttered by black students in classroom discourse, is said to cue to an "encourage me" interpretation in the black "style". The white teacher is said to miss this cue. I think it is hard to prove white American speakers do not use such a cue, as well as that teachers' decision not to fulfill the encouragement request is based only on missing the cue.

[10] Here it also can be asked "whether there are aspects of surface form of utterances, which are not functional in the signalling of interpretative frames. It can not be assumed beforehand that a change of a certain element of the surface structure will not have any influence on the interpretation of the utterance." (Ensink 1985:2) (However, Ensink's question seems to maintain the identity of context and frame.)

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Wem gehört die Sprache?

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